

# Records and Archives in Tennessee

The state of record-keeping and archives in Tennessee has made great strides in the past decade, although much work remains to be done. Signs are plentiful that a statewide network of archives—large and small, professional and volunteer, governmental and private—is taking shape. The state itself has begun to provide more of the standards and resources to encourage this process, but the progress that has been made actually is rooted in the determination of local citizens and communities to preserve the written record of their past. Tennesseans by nature are historically-minded and respectful of tradition, and that regard for the past has begun to express itself in greater attention to preserving our documentary heritage.

When the first *Volunteer Challenge* was published under the auspices of the Tennessee Historical Records Advisory Board in 1993, there were only a handful of local records archives and academic repositories and few archivists working outside the Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA). Ten years later, well over half of Tennessee counties have functioning archives and nearly that many have active public records commissions overseeing regular records disposition. In addition, there exists a growing network of academic and regional archives staffed by professional record keepers as well as a considerable number of smaller repositories keeping historical collections. Individuals wishing to take college courses in archival management now can choose from two academic programs at in-state universities. For local archives and those who staff them, annual training workshops and grant opportunities, in the form of the Tennessee Archives Institutes and the Local Archives Development Grants, are provided by the state. The University of Tennessee's County Technical Assistance Service (CTAS), in conjunction with TSLA, has issued a new manual for county records management that contains archival guidelines and revamped county records retention schedules. Clearly, improved state standards and leadership have contributed to the growing awareness across Tennessee of the importance of preserving historical records and the necessity of providing stable archival conditions in which to keep them.

By the same token, not all of the shortcomings noted by the first *Volunteer Challenge* have been overcome. That report commented that "historical records programs [throughout the state] have been hampered by a number of apparent weaknesses." Some of these weaknesses are structural, such as the administrative separation between the state archives and state records management and the fact that the State Library and Archives, the agency most responsible for permanent public records, does not have a seat on the State Public Records Commission. The tradition of government responsibility for maintaining and preserving public records has never been particularly strong in this state, and the disjointed and archaic provisions of Tennessee's public records law lend little support to the archival enterprise. Recent revisions to the law which allow government officials to keep permanent records solely in electronic form present a potent new threat to the long-term viability of these records. Tennessee still has a long way to go to bring its record keeping practices and accessibility to a level commensurate with the richness of the historical records themselves.

The flagship institution for the preservation of the state's documentary history remains the one hundred-and-fifty-year old Tennessee State Library & Archives. Through its statutory responsibility to maintain the permanent records of state (and local) government, its custodianship of the Tennessee Historical Society collections, and its own extensive collection of historic papers and manuscripts, TSLA continues to be the chief collecting point for records pertaining to the state's history. The venerable Library & Archives building on Capitol Hill attracts thousands of visitors each year to view and study Tennessee's history, while many thousands more do research with public records via the TSLA Web site. TSLA's fifty-year old microfilming program has allowed it to produce a photographic copy of most significant state and county records as well as a wide range of private manuscripts and family papers, making possible a wide distribution and use of these records without endangering fragile original documents.



*Tennessee State Library and Archives*

In September 1998, approximately sixty archivists, historians, genealogists, and librarians from across the state met in Murfreesboro to discuss the general condition of Tennessee's archives and historical records. One of the top recommendations by participants in this "Archives Summit" was to establish a task force to support and assist good record keeping across the state. Secretary of State Riley C. Darnell approved the creation of a new department within the Tennessee State Library and Archives called the Local Archives Program (LAP), and the position of Assistant State Archivist was created to direct the program. Mr. Darnell went further, however, mandating that a full staff and budget be devoted to help counties and municipalities across the state establish archives and put in place good practices to ensure the preservation of their historical records.

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Growth from 1990, when only a handful of county archives existed, to the present network of nearly sixty government records repositories represents tremendous progress. These facilities provide security for and access to an enormous volume of previously unavailable local government records, bringing the wealth of history and genealogy they contain into reach of all citizens. The number of Tennessee's courthouses where large volumes of irreplaceable old records are heaped in basements and crawlspaces is shrinking. Some of the worst cases of neglect, where two hundred years of records—the documentary heritage of an entire county—stood in peril of being lost forever, have been remedied and steps taken to ensure their long-term survival. The cost-savings from space consolidation and disposal of outdated temporary records has been considerable. By the same token, the level of public awareness and support for these fledgling operations is still quite low, and their existence in some cases remains precarious.

The main focus of the Local Archives Program (LAP) is to improve the care that public records receive in the county that creates them. The LAP staff works with county and municipal governments to improve both the conditions under which records are kept as well as the public's access to them. First and foremost, the LAP seeks to preserve documents such as the deeds, court minutes, probate and marriage records that are stored in (and outside) the state's ninety-five courthouses. Such records are defined by Tennessee law as having "permanent value"; therefore, they must be securely kept and made available for public inspection. The LAP's basic goal has been to help counties save these valuable documents and place them in facilities where they can be inspected and studied by the citizens of Tennessee. This decentralized approach, focused on outreach by the state to assist local government entities to take care of their own records, is a new departure for Tennessee.

Traditionally, this state has followed a more centralized course that left matters of records preservation entirely to the discretion of local officials, with the State Library & Archives providing micrographic services and, occasionally, serving as the repository of last resort.



*Sevier County Courthouse*



*Patrons searching records at the Sevier County Register's Office*

There are many success stories throughout the state, and a majority of Tennessee counties now have established archives where the records are organized and kept securely and where government officials, genealogists, and historical researchers can work comfortably with them. In east Tennessee, archives now exist in Anderson, Blount, Bradley, Cocke, Grainger, Greene, Hamblen, Hamilton, Hancock, Jefferson, Johnson, Knox, Monroe, Polk, Roane, Scott, Sevier, and Sullivan counties. In the middle part of the state, Bedford, Bledsoe, Coffee, Davidson, Dickson, Franklin, Giles, Humphreys, Lawrence, Lincoln, Macon, Maury, Montgomery, Moore, Overton, Robertson, Rutherford, Smith, Stewart, Sumner, Van Buren, Wayne, White, Williamson, and Wilson counties all have facilities where researchers may use the historical records. In west Tennessee, Benton, Carroll, Gibson, Hardin, Henry, Lauderdale, McNairy, Madison, Obion, and Shelby counties have archives. We are still far from achieving the goal of a records facility in every county and town in the state, but a good start has been made and a network of local government archives is emerging in Tennessee.



The records situation in the hundreds of smaller collections of records kept by museums, churches, libraries, and local historical societies is not nearly as promising. Since they do not have the protective mandate of state law, much of this material is poorly organized and has not benefited from systematic archival arrangement or conservation. Documents are often displayed as artifacts, or they are boxed away because no one knows quite what to do with them. Part of this lack of adequate care is due to the fact that it is typically untrained volunteers who oversee these small organizations, positions with little continuity and high rates of staff turnover. The best hope for such

scattered, private repositories is for the State of Tennessee to nurture a network of larger regional and academic archives that can provide guidance and training for volunteers working with records, and perhaps arrange to store the manuscripts themselves. With resources for records preservation so scarce, some measure of cooperation and pooling of resources in regional facilities is probably more than a good idea—it may be necessary for survival.

The Tennessee Historical Records Advisory Board (THRAB) provides an additional forum for interaction among the National Archives, the State Library & Archives, and the hundreds of historical records repositories around the state. In addition to large academic archives such as those at University of Tennessee-Knoxville, University of Memphis, the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University, and other regional repositories such as the Calvin McClung Collection, THRAB stays in touch with and processes grant applications from smaller repositories in churches, historic sites, and local historical societies. During the past decade, the Board has overseen successful grants from the National Historical Publications and Records Commissions to Tennessee archives totaling \$239,000. Through the THRAB and the Local Archives Program at TSLA, the state has increased its level of outreach support and guidance to a growing network of records facilities around the state. The following report, *Volunteer Challenge 2004*, is hereby submitted by the Tennessee Historical Records Advisory Board as an overview of the archival landscape across the state and a thorough, up-to-date directory of records-keeping organizations in Tennessee.

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